

8-26-10 – Convocation Address

By Dr. Carl Girelli

Good Morning. Chairman Fisher, President Turner, Dr. Stephens, Distinguished members of the Board of Trustees, treasured colleagues among the staff and faculty, seniors arrayed in robes for the first time as college students nearing graduation, and all members of the Catawba College community. It is my great honor to share a few thoughts on the occasion of this convocation dedicated to opening the 2010-2011 academic year.

Such beginnings have become more poignant to me as my own children face the challenges of an increasingly competitive and complicated world and entrust their futures to the hope that higher education brings. Some of you may know that I am a linguist by training. (impromptu comment here about rehearsing students in my class to nod and smile.) That may help you understand why the informal title of my comments today might be “A tale of two terms.” By terms, I mean words with special meanings, not semesters. Granted it is the opening convocation of fall term, but I am not using the term term in that way, but the other way. Now you know what it’s like to be a student in one of my classes trying to take notes. In any event, “a tale of two terms” from the Girelli family dialect.

In a simpler time, my children, just as many of Catawba's current generation of students spent their toddler years learning to count and learning to care from a purple dinosaur named Barney. In fact, in our home, we used to time our lives in units of Barney episodes. "Two Barney's to grandma's house," we would say or "Less than one Barney until bedtime" Perhaps innumerable Barney's until Daddy gets home from Costa Rica. It was a concept of time our children understood. For those of you already wondering what this means to you, my convocation address will last MUCH less than even one single Barney.

We also made a distinction in our house between Barney episodes we had recorded for repeated viewing and episodes we were seeing for the first time - in real time. The new episodes we called CARDINAL Barneys. A cardinal Barney was highly valued, and the term "cardinal" came to apply to anything that was in no way a re-run. A cardinal restaurant might be one we had never dined at before. You get the idea. For many years, our family dialect cheerfully used the word cardinal this way, until it one day occurred to my wife to question how "cardinal" came to have this meaning. So here is the tale of cardinal Barney as my son remembers it.

One day when my son was very small, let's say two and a half years old, I called him to the kitchen window and lifted him up

to see the birds in the yard next door. “Look at those birds Anthony, the bright red ones, they’re cardinals. He ooo’ed and ah’ed and admired the birds. But when I set him back on his feet, he looked at me puzzled. “Why did you want to show me those birds?” he wanted to know. “Because they are new and bright and interesting.” That was my very grown up answer. And so, guided by innocence and sound reasoning, the boy concluded that cardinal meant “new”, and “bright” and “interesting”, and he applied that meaning to the Barney episodes he had never seen before. For years only he knew why a cardinal Barney was a cardinal Barney. Somehow, even when it dawned on him that cardinal was really just the name of that particular bird, he let the rest of us enjoy our own way to capture and express the wonder of novelty, newness.

But I promised a tale of two terms and I still owe you one. For this second Girelliism we have to venture far from the back yard in Salisbury to the Gulf of Saint Lawrence on the North shore of Prince Edward Island, Canada. There, in the spring of the year, the fishing boats carry out a daily ritual of setting, baiting, hauling, and resetting lobster traps. The work is hard, often cold, and can turn dangerous as fast as a rope can loop around an ankle and haul you overboard. (I had promised myself I would say that bit about the rope pulling you overboard like a pirate, but have now lost me nerve.) Anyway, in fall of the year, the fishing boats gear up for fishing blue fin

tuna. Tuna fishing is more like sport than toil, but these fish are big, really big, a thousand plus pounds big. And in a global market hungry for sushi, catching a tuna can be enormously lucrative for the boat captain.

The blue fin tuna is a natural and economic treasure, a bounty that is hard to find, worth searching for, and worth waiting for. Occasionally, my family has been on Prince Edward Island when the word went out that some local salt was on the way to the harbor with a tuna in tow. Then we would gather the kids and race to the docks and to see the tuna come in. The spectacle was and is a rare treat ... Actually, given that we are talking about sashimi grade tuna, we might actually say it is not a rare treat, but a raw treat. That aside, the enormity of the occasion and the enormity of the FISH made an impression, especially on our children.

I should not have been surprised when one day, after diligently rummaging through boxes of goods at a church yard sale, my young daughter emerged, dusty and triumphant, from under a table with the perfect yard sale find, and exclaimed. "I found a tuna." - a "tuna" a treasure uncovered by good fortune and hard work. From then on, our family had a new way to label the good things that came our way through the combined forces of serendipity and diligence. To this day, when one of us gets

home from shopping, a standard question is “Did you find any tunas?”

I wonder if we coined these words, cardinal and tuna, because they captured concepts close to the core of our family values. So close that our collective experience of novelty and of discovery could not be expressed by words we already had.

Remembering the story of the cardinal, I think I have gained something that passes for insight from that day of bird watching many years ago. When my son asked me why I had pointed out those particular birds, the answer seemed obvious to me. How could anyone not see as I see that cardinals are new and bright and beautiful? The fact is that I had utterly missed HIS childlike perspective that EVERYTHING was “cardinal” the literal cardinal, yes, but also a robin, a sparrow, a rock, even the odds and ends and nuts and bolts that he was constantly discovering as he rode the sidewalks of campus and stowing under the seat of his big wheel. All novel, all shiny, all absolutely fascinating to his young eyes. I had learned, if it can be called learning, what to relegate to the background and what deserved the full attention of the foreground. For him, the whole world was the foreground.

I would encourage seniors and other veteran students, staff and faculty who know the ropes, to take a page from this child’s book. On the one hand, we can strive to see the familiar as if it

were brand new, to “foreground” more of the things and especially the people around us.

On the other hand, we can recognize that for people who are new to Catawba College, there IS nothing ordinary. The class of 2014 comprises almost one third of the total day student population. Of them, one third are breaking new ground as the first in their family to earn a four-year degree. If I were to walk into the chapel with a newly arrived member of the Catawba Community, I would probably point out the bright and beautiful stained glass work that you see behind me. It is, indeed, a cardinal work of art. I might well overlook as “background,” the fine grain of the well-crafted hardwood pew that is right in front of me, or Dr. Green’s way cool hat. Or maybe would ignore the inset bricks on the wall at either side of the stained glass behind me. If this is all new to you, you may have noticed those inset bricks, all staggered and evenly spaced. Why are they there? Would those indentations make good handholds and toeholds for climbing that wall? I feel sure at least some of you are feeling busted because that is exactly what you were wondering when you were supposed to be listening to me. Not to worry. There’s a reason I know what you are thinking. I have been on the receiving end of many opening convocation addresses –enough to know that my Barney interval has almost run out, so let me conclude with these thoughts.

This year, let's try to pull to the foreground more of our world and see more through childlike eyes, if possible without climbing any walls. Seniors, this will be especially easy for you as you contemplate graduation. You can now count the times you will sit in this chapel as a student, and that will make you very aware of the details, highlighting the ordinary things that will have meaning for you in the years to come.

Let's also recognize that for some these are uncharted and potentially frightening waters. Our encouragement and guidance are precious.

For those who have just joined the Catawba community, I hope you are now experiencing the magical confluence of hard work and good fortune. You have sought something that you knew must be out there, but wondered if you would find it. You have worked, and searched and waited. In finding Catawba College and your place here, you have surely found a tuna.

Finally, for all of us - faculty, staff, students and administrators, let's have a new and bright and interesting year, shall we. I predict a bona fide Cardinal 2010-2011 academic year.

Thank you.